Looking at persecution and suffering theologically

Initial thoughts

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Abstract

Persecution and suffering for Christ are important parts of our overall work to advance the church in every part of the world. Western theologies tend to reflect a church established in a particular culture without reference to the global mission of the church and the possible negative outcomes of the gospel's encounter with other cultures. Therefore it is necessary to include persecution and suffering for Christ which are present realities in many countries, in our theological reflections. As an initial step, we should embrace the reality of persecution.

Keywords persecution, suffering, theodicy, praxis.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I offer a theological overview of some of the major questions and issues that arise as we consider the mission of God and the consequential suffering and persecution that Christians are experiencing today and have experienced ever since the time of Christ. When I say "initial thoughts," I do not mean that we are starting from scratch. Many scholars have written on this subject and have helped to spark new interest in reflecting on persecution and suffering theologically.

Suffering for Christ is, as we know well, a part of the mission of God. Many theologians have affirmed this truth. Although Western societies hold human rights issues and fighting modern forms of slavery in high esteem – indeed, as very significant work and newsworthy activity – religious persecution (particularly Christian persecution) is not a popular subject and receives relatively little media attention. Recently, however, persecution has become so blatant in some cases that even mainstream media are reporting it. Some in the Western world still have difficulty processing persecution because it is rarely part of their own life experience, those who understand the reality of persecution are speaking out.

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Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary president Scott W. Sunquist, for example, articulates a number of important insights into suffering as part of God's mission to the world. We must understand, he states, that "mission has a temporal reality – it participates in the suffering of God" (Sunquist 2013:xii). Mission starts with God, who determines the means by which it is done. Sunquist continues, "Mission is from the heart of God, in each context, and it is carried out in suffering in this world for God's eternal glory" (2013:xii). "It may seem strange," he remarks, "to raise the issue of suffering," but he explains:

> In contrast to our culture … we believe that God is the one who heals and conquers death. We also see, however, that God does not heal all illnesses, and we believe that God enters into our suffering and endures our death and alienation. Suffering is inescapable as a central element in God's redemption (Sunquist 2013:xvi).

When Sunquist experienced the oppression that new Christians had to undergo in new areas of Christian mission, he became convinced that suffering is indeed a part of God's mission to the world: "The overwhelming and sustaining image that I came away with is of the massive suffering of Christians as Christianity has developed in each new region. Suffering is very much a part of Christian experience, as well as human existence in general" (Sunquist 2013:xiv).

2. Theological and missiological perspectives

The Bad Urach Statement is a foundational document for all who desire to think theologically about suffering and persecution. It affirms that God's mission is revealed in the theology of the Bible. As a part of our theological discussion of God's mission to the world, we should also seek to understand persecution and suffering for Christ's sake from a theological perspective and how it is integral to the *missio Dei*. The mission of God is the *occasion* for persecution and suffering, since persecution arises in response to Christians' efforts to share their faith in a variety of circumstances and cultures, some of which are hostile and resistant.

When I was teaching missiology at a university in Oklahoma, USA, I became aware that they were beginning a program in "Persecution Studies." As I learned more about what they were doing and eventually taught classes in the program, I realized that although I have had a lot of training in missiology, not much was said about the cost to the persons doing mission, except perhaps those early missionaries working on the frontiers. I think that the cost of discipleship was simply assumed. The missionary life can be difficult, hence the idea that missions and suffering go together. But there was only occasional mention of those who became martyrs for preaching the gospel.

As I pursued studies in the history of missions, I became increasingly aware of the role of persecution and suffering in the lives of missionaries throughout the ages. While working for an organization that supported the persecuted church around the world, I traveled to countries hostile to the gospel and saw the results of persecution firsthand.

Participating in the mission of God means we will be confronted by many cultural philosophies and ideologies, some of which reject Christianity outright. Missionaries and missional pastors often discover that a particular philosophy or ideology that dominates the culture is in opposition to Christian faith. These differences can become points of conflict with the culture. When people come to faith in Christ, they begin to deal with the core values and cultural worldview in which they have been immersed, and they realize that belief in Christ will change their perspective and worldview as well as their heart and spiritual life. This means that new believers are faced with formidable challenges, spiritually, morally, and intellectually. They become aliens in their own culture. Christopher J. H. Wright (2006:182) observes:

> Those who came to faith in Christ out of a background of Greco-Roman polytheism embraced the biblical monotheistic worldview. But they still lived surrounded by all the idolatrous reality of the culture within which they were now called to live out their Christian identity. This posed daily dilemmas for them. The thoroughness of Paul's mission practice is that he was not content merely with evangelism and church planting but was concerned to build mature communities of believers who could think biblically through the ethical issues they faced in their ambient religious culture. His pastoral and ethical guidance to his churches was thus as much a part of his missional task as his evangelistic zeal, and just as theologically grounded too.

The need to explain and defend the faith presents a severe challenge to Christians in hostile or resistant nations. Very few people are won over by pure intellectual argument, but once people become Christians, reasonable discussions can fortify and mature their faith. They must embrace a biblical worldview and belief system that can give them a more realistic perspective on God and the world. Their conversion makes life difficult for them in the culture from which they were converted, especially in a totalitarian society that demands uniformity of belief. Those Christians realize the sacrifice and suffering necessary to keep and spread the faith; consequently it does not seem unusual to them to include persecution and suffering in their theology of mission.

Questions about God's mission and suffering for Christ's sake need to be addressed in a manner that will give us deeper insight into why mission and suffering are related. The promotion for Peter Kreeft's book, *Making Sense out of Suffering*

(1986), says, "This book is for everyone who has ever wept and wondered 'Why?'" We have all wept and wondered why God seems to require suffering and allow persecution to exist. Augustine said, "*Credo ut intelligam*" – meaning that "one believes in order to know" or that one must believe to be able to understand. Certain issues and questions beg for adequate answers. People live for years mulling over issues such as the persecution of Christians in their minds but never take the time to resolve them. Theology is a tool given to us by God to resolve our questions with greater intentionality.

3. A definition of persecution

Persecution, as described in the Bad Urach Statement, is essentially suffering for the sake of Christ while serving him (Sauer 2010:1.6.1). This definition refers to Christian persecution, but the term is used in a much broader sense in society. Accordingly, the Bad Urach Statement offers three more definitions, ranging from the general to the specific. A general definition of persecution is any "unjust hostile action which causes damage from the perspective of the victim(s)" (Sauer 2010:1.6.2). It can come from multiple motivations and can be delivered in multiple forms and degrees.

> Religious persecution is an unjust action against a believer or a group of believers motivated by religious reasons, although other motivations, like ethnic hatred, gender issues, or political viewpoint, may also be motivation for their actions. Persecution may include systematic oppression, discrimination, annoyance, genocide, and harassment. Persecution of Christians further narrows the definition to persecution for religious reasons because they are Christians. (Sauer 2010:1.6.2)

These actions would include the systematic denial of religious freedom and rights.

The late Glenn Penner, with whom I taught with prior to his untimely death and whose legacy I hope to carry on, defined persecution as "a situation where Christians are repetitively, persistently and systematically inflicted with grave and serious suffering or harm and deprived of (or significantly threatened with deprival of) their basic human rights because of a difference that comes from being a Christian that the persecutor will not tolerate" (Penner 2004:163).

4. Why some Christians do not pay attention to the reality of persecution

Some Christians do not want to embrace the reality of religious persecution because they do not personally experience it. It seems far off and distant, outside their range of experience and interest and much too difficult to think about.

Eric Metaxas contends that many in the West are ignorant of persecution, either failing to acknowledge it or simply having not encountered the idea. Metaxas says that "those of us who live in the modern West don't experience anything along these lines, and most of us are deeply ignorant of the sufferings of our brethren around the world. Indeed, as we read these words now, millions suffer" (Metaxas, 2013:vii, Foreword) A similarly strong indictment of the Western Church is found in the Bad Urach Statement:

> In Western societies, more often than not, a lack of attention is given to religious persecution, due to apathy, lack of empathy, and cowardice, or because such reports disturb the idealistic pictures of harmonious life elsewhere, and might endanger ecumenical and inter-religious relations. This leads to a conscious repression of the reality of persecution and an aversion to clear language in that regard. (Sauer 2010:3.2.1)

The enormity of the issue, the gruesomeness of some persecution events, and the desire to avoid responsibility (because knowing requires a person to do something about it) keep Christians in the West from fully embracing the reality of persecution.

5. Why people or governments become persecutors

Why do people decide to persecute Christians? Perhaps believers are seen as a threat to prevailing religious beliefs (especially where religious belief is equated with cultural, political, or ethnic identity), to social stability (breaking up family and community unity), and to political allegiances (where religion and the state are closely identified or identical). In ancient Rome, Christianity was seen as a threat to civic safety because of the belief that the gods, if not given due allegiance, would not protect Roman society.

The more militant, radical groups within such faiths as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism target Christians because of their attitudes toward "non-believers" and the belief that Christians blaspheme their gods. Religious nationalism can become a political tool to manipulate, coerce, and control the population. They may see Christianity as a Western religion which threatens the traditional social fabric of the society (family relationships, traditional religious beliefs, customs, etc.).

Governments become persecutors when there is an ideological clash with Christian allegiance to Christ, especially when the state seeks to be the ultimate authority and demands total allegiance. In communist nations, the atheistic ideology and the demand for total allegiance to the state forces Christians into an obvious conflict. In many countries, government pressure aims to stamp out Christianity altogether, whereas secular forces in Western countries allow religious freedom but seek to make religion ineffective in influencing public life, morals, or policy. This attempt to keep Christianity from being

fully Christian (as when the name of Christ cannot be mentioned in public prayer) or to relegate it to private life is a subtle form of harassment and discrimination calculated to bar Christian influence from the public forum, in the hope that it will merely fade away.

6. Theological assumptions for practical ministry

All professions and ministries, as practical as their work may be, have an assumed philosophy (in our case, theological and missiological assumptions) that defines, describes, and drives their work, whether they recognize it or not. We can thus speak of a theology of ministry, since we are doing more than describing our philosophy in terms of theoretical components or rational arguments; rather, we articulate it in relation to God's mission and his revelation to us as believers. It is not something that we create out of our minds but something we have received as a gift of grace and calling.

In the wake of the persecution of Christians, we must clearly grasp the important questions being raised about the practice of Christianity. Persecution will arise in many parts of the world as we carry out God's mission. Arthur C. McGill writes:

> A theological investigation … must be a real labor, moving always toward the light of Christ, but in that light wrestling with real darkness – with questions that truly dismay and perplex, questions that arise from the torments of existence, like the question of suffering. (McGill 1968:28)

Theological thinking about persecution and suffering participates in Christ's work, because theologians are called by God to articulate the truths of the Bible in the context of ministry and Christian living. More specifically, this must include the contexts in which persecution and suffering for Christ's sake is a reality. "For theology," adds McGill, "is not just a detached intellectual exercise about certain subject matter. It itself is a participation in Christ's redemptive work" (1968:31). This makes theological work very significant.

7. The importance of a theology of suffering for Christ

First, a theology of suffering is an attempt to put the question of suffering and pain into the larger perspective of faith in God and resulting practice, such as doing missionary work, evangelizing in hostile areas, living a Christlike, holy life, loving our enemies, pastoring a congregation that is being persecuted, and praying for those being persecuted. Our theology represents our faith commitment, which sets the parameters of our faith. Suffering may challenge our faith and our level of commitment.

Second, we need to reconsider our assumptions in relation to questions raised by our practical ministry. Do our theological beliefs correct our (possibly inadequate) perspective of reality? How do suffering, pain, and sacrifice factor into our theology of mission?

Third, a theology of suffering attempts to understand the implications of the questions or issues introduced by serious reflection on suffering and pain, and it allows us to see if our assumptions help us understand God's mission. Is there any redemptive value to suffering? In what way could it be redemptive? Why does God allow suffering, especially for those seeking to obey their calling from God, and how do we deal with unjust suffering? Suffering compels tough questions about why such experiences exist in a world created by a good God. Therefore, the problem of evil must be engaged. It is a prominent part of the philosophy of religion, stemming from the desire to make sense of the complex questions that arise from the reality of suffering.

Fourth, a theology of suffering attempts to develop a series of principles or theological tenets that will shape a perspective, approach, and methodology for practical ministry to those who suffer for the sake of Christ. Theology is an ongoing process of trying to understand God's revelation and will in the context of real-life issues and struggles, including the suffering and persecution of Christians for their testimony of faith in Christ.

I would propose that a theology of suffering generally, and a theology of suffering as a result of persecution in particular, should include the following tenets:

1) Theology is a necessary aspect of genuine mission and ministry, so a theology of mission must include a theology of suffering.
2) Every form of ministry should be informed, directed, and driven by our theological convictions (tenets, precepts) rather than primarily by personal emotions, sociological principles, or humanitarian concerns. Our practical concerns should not dictate our theology, but these concerns and the humanitarian needs we confront should engender a truly Christian response, one that reflects the nature and purposes of the God we serve. The practice of ministry should flow out of our deepest theological convictions. In union with Christ and with each other, we will pursue God's goals and purposes.
3) Many Christians around the world are suffering from some form of persecution, and theology needs to address this fact. Consequently, a theology of suffering is an integral part of God's mission to the world and of a theology of mission. Theological inquiry must address all aspects of Christian life and ministry.
4) God seeks to redeem the world through redemptive suffering, first by his Son Jesus Christ and then through those who are obedient to Christ by going out into the world to serve him, no matter the cost. Christians thus participate in redemptive suffering when they continue in Christ's ministry through suffering on behalf of Christ and others.

8. Theology of persecution and suffering

The questions that arise as we reflect on our calling and mission must be addressed in such a way as to substantiate our efforts to present the gospel across national and international barriers. This calling will most likely mean confrontation, potential con-

flict, and the possibility of suffering and dying to fulfill this mission. We stand alongside those who are being mistreated, insulted, and persecuted for their faith (Heb. 10:33-34), and we take the suffering of our brothers and sisters upon ourselves as though it is ours (Heb. 13:3). Christians have a calling to be witnesses in all contexts (even hostile and restricted contexts), and all Christians are to join Christ in his global mission and to accept the mandate of evangelism, which becomes the occasion for persecution and suffering for the Lord. We should pray for those facing such persecution and, where possible, provide them with materials to assist their evangelism.

A theology of persecution and suffering for Christ's sake helps Christians to grasp God's will and realize that persecution and suffering may be the lot of some believers. A theological framework helps us to recognize, understand, and evaluate suffering for Christ and persecution in light of our calling to be witnesses. It is part of acquiring a mature perspective based on a mature and reasonable understanding, rather than just relying on mere sympathy to determine our understanding and response. Richard Wurmbrand, the founder (along with his wife, Sabina) of The Voice of the Martyrs, wrote, "God says we should serve Him not only with all our heart, but also with all our mind. This means intellectual work, hard work" (Wurmbrand 2000:11). It means that we must understand suffering for Christ's sake, both biblically and theologically. Consider the following questions:

1) How central is suffering for Christ to the whole of biblical teaching, or is suffering for righteousness' sake only a minor theme?
2) How do persecution and suffering factor into God's purpose and method for reaching the world?
3) Does suffering count for something beyond just being a witness? In what way can it be redemptive?

9. Setting up the context for engaging the questions

There is hardly a topic more relevant than suffering for righteousness' sake for the church today. People are suffering for their testimony of Christ at this very moment. They are doing what is right in the sight of God and of reasonable people, yet they suffer horrific pain because of their faith in Christ.

Christiaan Beker, a biblical scholar who suffered as a result of the Nazi occupation of his country, captured the pathos of our age:

> What characterizes our time is that the spatial and quantitative dimension of suffering, its worldwide scope, reinforces its qualitative dimension, its experienced intensity. Moreover, the scope and intensity of suffering seems to suffocate any hopeful attempt to correlate suffering with projects of authentic hope. (Beker 1987:14)

Suffering is an "ever-present, undesired, and hated side of human existence" (Ton 1997:3). The Jewish Holocaust raised the question of unjust suffering to a new level. It also raised serious questions about God." (Beker 1987:14)

10. Primary questions

As we begin our study of suffering and persecution, we are confronted with some questions that trouble those who seek to go beyond the simplistic answers often given to questions about suffering and persecution. Many Christians, while steadfast in their faith, seek deeper answers that will be significant for their own spiritual well-being and their quest to understand the God they serve and the circumstances of that service.

First, how do we reconcile a loving God and the reality of suffering? The key word for this question is *theodicy* (usually related to suffering in general, but in this case specifically to those suffering as a result of their testimony for Christ). Theodicy is an attempt to explain evil (suffering and pain) while still maintaining that God is good. It seeks to defend God's integrity in the face of serious challenges to the character and nature of God presented by our present reality.

For many non-believers, the presence of evil and suffering is a major obstacle to believing in a good God. Christians usually accept biblical assertions that God is good, that he is totally and unreservedly opposed to evil in any form, including sin, and that he did not create or predestine evil. What, then, is evil? Henri Blocher and N. T. Wright have written on the topic of evil. Blocher has a short but potent definition: "Evil is defined in the Bible by its failure to conform to the wishes and commands of God" (1996:106). Wright's definition is more extensive:

> Evil is the force of anti-creation, anti-life, the force which opposes and seeks to deface and destroy God's good world of space, time and matter, and above all God's image-bearing human creatures. That is why death, as Paul saw so graphically in 1 Corinthians 15:26, is the final great enemy. (N. T. Wright 2006:89)

Westerners have debated how to explain evil. N. T. Wright takes us back to the biblical term used for the manifestation of evil among humans: "The Gospels tell the story of the deeper, darker forces which operate at a *supra-personnel level*, forces for which the language of the demonic, despite all its problems, is still at the least adequate" (2006:81). Evil, then, is demonic.

Blocher writes about what seems to be the larger question. Although humanity may debate the origin and existence of evil and what forms it may present itself to us, the foremost question in most human minds is "How Long?" (Blocher 1994:120).

Blocher, after a detailed description of evil and a detailed list of possible explanations of its existence, does not leave us hanging regarding the final outcome of

the war on evil. He writes, "Without the slightest doubt, the Kingdom, according to the prophets who are the reference point of the New Testament, entails *victory over evil*, over folly, and war, sin and suffering, sickness and death" (1994:107).

The second question asks whether there is any redemptive value or significance in suffering on behalf of Christ, for those who suffer or even for those who persecute. It is not redemptive in the same way that Christ's sacrifice was redemptive, because Christ's atonement was once and for all time, but the suffering of his witnesses participates in some manner in Christ's sufferings and extends his sacrifice (Col. 1:24), continuing the ministry of Christ that was initiated at the time of his death on the cross to atone for our sins (Phil. 3:10). The grace of God that flows from the cross through the atonement of Christ is utilized in blessing those who suffer and those who cause the suffering (in a different way), since through the suffering of Christ and his people God uses his grace in prevenient grace to reach those who are lost. The suffering of God's faithful witness is a sacred offering to God, who honors the witness and releases grace in redemptive ways into the situation. It is also a blessing to those who are persecuted (Matt. 5:10-11); it is an honor (Phil. 1:29). The ministry of God's witness is a part of the *application of grace* that was generated at the atonement, for both the witness and the ones engaging in persecution. The suffering of the witness can be the avenue of saving grace for the persecutor, as God reaches out to the persecutor with His convicting grace. This is why we love and pray for our persecutors. The grace that comes from the atonement of Christ through the Holy Spirit counteracts evil, transforms people and situations, transfers people from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, frustrates Satan's attempt to establish dominion, brings the spiritually dead to life, and saves people from their sins.

The third question is actually a series of related questions. Can and does God suffer? When Christ suffered, did God suffer? Does God really feel our pain, or is pain only a human experience? Is it necessary for God to suffer so that we can benefit from his help? Would his suffering contribute in some manner to our healing or comfort? Would suffering reveal a weakness in God's omnipotence or be a magnificent expression of his love? The theological discussions of these questions are focused on key words such as *impassibility* (God does not have emotions) and *immutability* (God does not change).

The idea that God can and does suffer is, according to Richard Bauckham, dealt with by numerous theologians, some leaning in the direction of a suffering God and others embracing it completely. Bauckham notes, for example, that Kazoh Kitamori wrote about the suffering of God and that many other Asian theologians followed his example. Other theologians who wrote about the suffering of God include Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Jurgen Moltmann among the Germans, Abraham Heschel among Jewish scholars, Maldwyn Hughes and C. S.

Dinsmore, of the English and Welsh tradition, and Jean Gilot in the French Catholic tradition (Bauckham 1984:7).

Speaking about the Christ-event (meaning the crucifixion of Christ) and how it is related to the Trinity, Moltmann writes:

> Humiliation to the point of death on the cross corresponds to God's nature is the contradiction of abandonment. When the crucified Jesus is called the "image of the invisible God," the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. (Moltmann 1974:205)

He asserts that the Christ-event is really a God-event and that "the God-event takes place on the cross of the risen Christ" (Moltmann 1974:205). Moltmann emphasizes the unity of the Trinity and the inter-penetration of the Father with the Son so that what the Son experiences, the Father experiences as well.

Michael J. Gorman explains the relationship between Jesus and God in a different manner. Paul's experience with the crucified Jesus had deep implications for understanding the nature of God. He writes:

> The initial and ongoing encounter with Jesus . . . reformulated his understanding of who God is and how God is fully experienced. That the Messiah, God's Son, was sent by God to be crucified and then raised by God, meant that somehow *God and the cross were inextricably interrelated.* The connection led Paul to see not only Jesus, but also God the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," as defined by the cross. (Gorman 2001:9)

At the cross, Jesus was giving insight into the nature of God. Gorman sees this as the interpretive principle through which we now see and understand who God is. He further clarifies his discussion about the suffering God by stating that although there is interrelational conformity in the cross, it does not mean that God the Father is crucified" (Gorman 2001:17).

Fourth, what are the practical implications of a theology of suffering for ministry to those who suffer? The key word is *praxis*, which means a method of action and reflection. This relates to the fact that God utilizes suffering and sacrifice to accomplish his mission of redemption of the world. Suffering for righteousness' sake ("Christ's sake" in the New Testament) is the method God uses to reach, redeem, and transform the world. It is central to a theology of suffering and persecution. We can expect persecution and suffering (John 15:18-20; and 2 Tim. 3:12). The fact that we are to suffer for righteousness' sake reminds us that our righteousness comes from God. Our mission, given to us by a righteous God, is therefore a holy mission. When we obediently try to fulfill it, the world may not always be appreciative. In fact, it may respond with hostility toward us.

11. Conclusion

Although I have spent most of my academic life since returning to the United States focused on mission to the Western world – which I consider one of the most difficult areas in the world in which to evangelize today – a theology of suffering and persecution remains foremost on my mind and in my heart. Persecution is not present in the United States in the same intensity as in other parts of the world, but it should be the concern of the whole church. The questions I have raised must be addressed more fully for those who suffer persecution and for those who support and stand by them in their time of difficulty. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Cor. 12:26, NIV).

> Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (Heb. 10:32-35, NIV)

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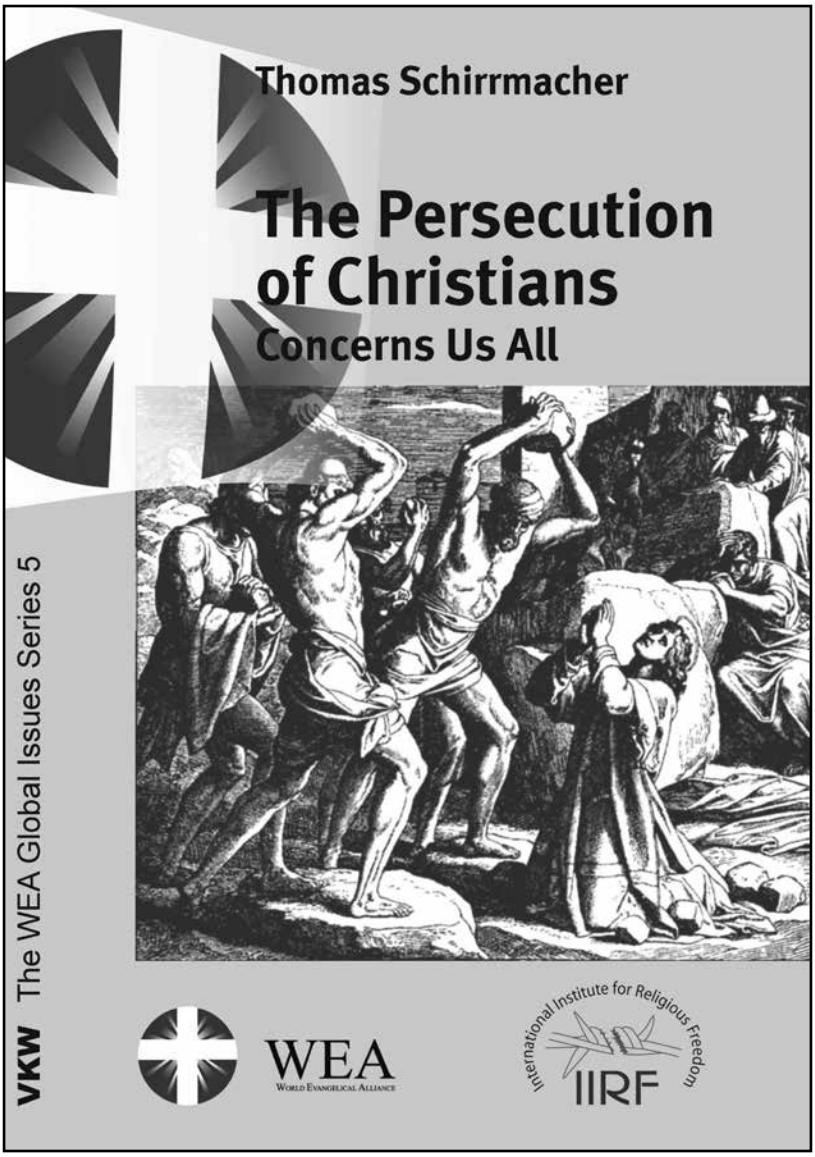

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